

*Paying our Debts to Veterans*

**Washington, Nov 7, 2003** - For the survival of our freedom, we owe our veterans everything. But in a world of limited resources, Congress cannot give everything.

Last week, however, we did the right thing.

For years, the law of the land has been unfair to our veterans. Wounded in battle, our veterans return home to a country that compensates them for their disability; but when it comes time to retire, they don't receive the benefits for which they are eligible.

And since arriving to Congress, I've heard from one veteran after another—men and women who have bravely worn the uniform of our country—about this injustice.

Many humbly speak of sacrifice for our country. Of being shot at. Of watching friends die.

Yet, when they return home, they don't receive the benefits for which they are eligible. And dare I say—the benefits they earned.

Specifically, the law requires their military retirement pay to be reduced by the amount of the disability compensation they are receiving. Basically, although eligible and deserving of both benefits, our veterans do not receive the full benefit due them for their many years of service protecting our country.

On Friday, Congress took significant steps to change that.

Thanks to language in the bill that authorizes funding for the Defense Department, in most cases disability benefits earned in uniform will not be forfeited simply because the veteran reaches the age of retirement.

The bill establishes a payment program to compensate retirees with disabilities resulting from the award of the Purple Heart or other combat-related disabilities rated 60 percent or greater to receive their full retirement pay and disability compensation.

And, effective on January 1, 2004, all 20-year military retirees with a Purple Heart or combat-related disability, including national guardsmen and reservists, will be eligible for concurrent receipt. The bill also authorizes concurrent receipt to be phased in over 10 years for the remaining military retirees who are the most severely disabled (50 percent disabled and above).

The Good Book says, "if you owe debts pays debts, if honor then honor, if respect then respect."

By meeting the urgent needs of the defense of the nation we pay a debt to those who risk and expend their lives in the advancement of our freedom.

And by addressing the injustice of current veterans benefits, Congress went a long way to paying the debt we owe to those we can never fully repay.

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